

How Far Can East Asian STS Go? A Commentary

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If geography truly is destiny, the dispersal or extension of science and technology studies (STS) across the globe will reshape our understanding of the social constitution of ideas and artifacts. It should redraw the great divides between nature and culture, non-modern and modern, local and cosmopolitan, science and society. It may throw up new phenomena and fresh analytic frameworks. Certainly, as Fu Daiwie suggests, it will not be business as usual.

The birth of the new journal signals the emergence of novel sites for STS and the development of a broader community of scholars. It provides a guide to the travels of STS beyond Western Europe and North America. Fu Daiwie and his colleagues therefore deserve our congratulations for helping to re-chart the map of STS for the twenty-first century.

The prospectus for the journal traces delicately the lines of tension between national aspirations, disciplinary conventions, and global sensibilities. Evidently, the study of science and technology—the analytic impulse at least—may be linked to the developmental goals of the nation-state. In this sense, every member of the United Nations deserves, or even requires, its vernacular STS. Of course, the more serviceable STS appear to state policy makers, the more likely emergent communities of STS scholars will receive government support. At the same time, many of these scholars, functioning as critical intellectuals, may choose to follow a more cosmopolitan approach, a mode of argument that does not necessarily respect national borders or bolster the self-regard of the state, though it attracts the attention of colleagues elsewhere. Addressing the more general problem of the globalization of science and technology, fashioning a thoroughly postcolonial analysis of technoscience, enhances the scope and discursive power of the discipline, even if

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it leaves most state policy makers cold. It will be interesting to see how this new journal treats the practical concern of reconciling state demands for better management of science and technology with the discipline's interest in the critical accounting for how technoscience travels and becomes implicated in the *unequal* reciprocities of local and global, in the complex patterning of dominance, resistance, adaptation, and indifference. That is, to resort to Gramsci's old formulation, how the journal brings together professional and organic (or postcolonial) intellectuals.

As Fu Daiwie points out, a postcolonial analysis of technoscience will look different in East Asia with its distinctive histories of colonialism and semi-colonialism. Japanese colonialism, for example, shaped very different formations of medicine and science from those developing under the U.S. colonial state in the Philippines. The history and politics of technoscience in the rest of Chinese East Asia promise further complications and conundrums. In exploring these local contingencies and accomplishments, it will always be important to avoid homogenization of the phenomena and monadization of mentalities. "Area studies" threaten to haunt East Asian STS. Thus there is the constant danger of fetishizing identity and dwelling on the ontological separateness of technoscience in the region, ignoring the messy politics and history of representation and practice. We need to be attentive to hybridization and creolization, and sensitive to nomad technologies, trickster sciences, and fluid identities. Indeed, East Asian STS in reframing STS should also corrode the very idea of East Asia, dissolving that hoary old ontological distinction—STS should become East Asia's postcolonial supplement, in deconstructive terms.

Something else in this admirable prospectus made me a little uneasy: that is, the notion of compiling East Asian case studies of science and technology. I must admit the reminder of James B. Conant's *Harvard Case Studies in Experimental Science*, those influential volumes with their Cold War functionalist gloss, gave me a touch of neurasthenia. The advice of my East Asian colleagues may well be simply to get over it—but I wonder if we run the risk of entering into an ontological echo chamber, trying to collect examples of distinctively East Asian technoscience, when we should be examining instead the history and politics of "the case," and its colonial functionality.

That such issues arise at all attests, I think, to the value of the project.